Important Community Resources

• Pittsburgh Police (Get them online at www.city.pittsburgh.pa.us/police)
• Citizen Observer—Help the Pittsburgh Police fight crime by signing up for the Citizen Observer, a secure, easy to use, and cost-effective internet-based community alert toolset. It allows law enforcement agencies to quickly enter content about crimes or incidents, and within seconds, push that info out to businesses, citizens, watch groups, and others that have signed up to receive the alerts.

Safety Tips for Home Visitors
Planning for a Safe Home Visit

This brochure was made in collaboration with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) and the Home Visiting Network (HVN.) The ACHD and the HVN thank Detective Ashley Thompson for his guidance in preparing this brochure.
Agency Policy

Locate and read your agency’s policy about safety while conducting home visits. Know whether your agency

• Has policies related to safety in home visiting, driving in poor weather or road conditions.
• Has a code word or notification system if you were in trouble.
• Allows for carrying and using protective devices such as pepper spray.
• Has procedures for evaluating and arranging for police assistance and escorts if needed.
• Has a response plan if you are late in returning to the office.
• Has procedures for checking on staff who conduct home visits and ensuring that any concern about any visit is followed up immediately.
• Keeps a register or has a system clearly documents where staff will be at all time and provides follow-up for each instance where a staff member has not reported back at a scheduled time.
• Has a two-person visit policy for first visits and for other visits as needed
• Has a policy about who to call if there is yelling, screaming, breaking glass etc coming from within the home you are to visit. (i.e., should you call the police?)

About Your Car

• Keep your car is in good running condition, make sure it has enough gas, and is kept locked at all times; keep a flashlight and a first aid-kit and other emergency supplies in car, include all-weather gear.
• Park within direct sight of the home’s entry and in a well-lit, unobstructed area (do not park near bushes or other foliage). Always park on the street or in a way to allow you to leave quickly if necessary for your safety.
• Park near the client’s home.
• Do not park your car in someone’s assigned parking space, or block anyone’s access to his/her car.
• Do not park in the driveway of the home drive (you could be blocked in) - but if you need to, think about reverse parking in, so you can simply drive out.
• Park your car close to the door (keep car facing out when parked).
• As you exit your car, be attentive to people in the area and any unsecured dogs.
• In a cul de sac/dead end streets, park in the direction of the cul de sac/ dead end street exit.
After the Visit

• Be aware of surroundings as you exit the house.
• Do not make phone calls until you are out of view of the residence.
• Before entering your car, check around the car (under the car, in back seat).
• Lock your car doors as soon as you get in (reasons are car jacking and people opening passenger doors) - many vehicles nowadays have an ability to unlock just the driver door / or at least central locking capabilities.

Tips for Dealing with Aggression During a Home Visit:

Some tips to consider if you are faced with an aggression incident during a home visit:

• If an aggressive incident occurs, remember to try and remain as calm as possible and leave the home as soon as possible. Think about your organization’s procedure to follow.
• Try and keep a barrier, eg: table, between you and the aggressor where practical.
• Speak slowly and calmly, take deep breaths, try not to say anything that could inflame the situation.
• At the earliest opportunity call the Police, even if it is only the threat of assault, and follow your organization’s procedures.
• Try not to walk backwards as you risk tripping over.

General Safety Tips to Remember

• Trust your instincts.
• Stay alert.
• Know what behaviors in others set you off or provoke you, and ways you can respond to the behaviors without placing yourself in danger.
• Act confident and sure of yourself; ignore provocative comments or behaviors.
• Keep your hands free. Do not be distracted by talking on a cell phone. Carry a personal alarm if feasible – a clip-on one is best.
• Don’t walk through a group of people standing together on the sidewalk/street.
• Always have an excuse to leave prepared in advance just in case. Leave the home immediately if you sense danger.
• Dress appropriately
  ▶ Wear clothes and shoes that make a quick escape possible; do not wear clothes and shoes that can impede your movement; pants are best.
  ▶ Leave jewelry at home.
  ▶ Leave purse at office.
  ▶ Leave your valuable possessions at home.
• Carry only your ID/ driver’s license, a cell phone and/or pager, necessary cash, and keys. Keep your cell phone close at hand. Keep your car keys in your pocket or hand. Even if you carry bags, keep your car keys and mobile phone on person (you can barricade yourself in a room/toilet and use your phone in an emergency).
• Wear a name badge if you have one, but don’t wear one around your neck; a clip-on is best.
• Take dog biscuits along to calm excited/aggressive dogs.
• Be aware of any drug paraphernalia in the area surrounding the home.
• Schedule home visits early in the day whenever possible.
Before the Visit

- Ensure that you have obtained as much information about your client as possible before the visit and make sure that all appropriate risk assessments are carried out.
- Call ahead.
- Make sure you have the correct address.
- Ask questions about pets, children, other potential visitors etc. Ask family to secure pets before arrival.
- Always make sure someone at your agency knows your visiting schedule and route, including the family’s name, address, telephone number, the date and time of your visit, and when you expect to return.
- If possible, canvass the area around the home’s address. Assess potential safety concerns and take precautions. If you are unfamiliar with the neighborhood surrounding the family’s home, take time to learn about it so that you know what to expect. Identify the safest routes for getting there and back, and resources for getting help, if needed. Consider stopping at the local police station if appropriate.
- Identify safe areas (i.e., restaurants, telephones, rest rooms, police stations) within the neighborhood.
- Consider a neutral meeting location if visit cannot be made safely at home (i.e., library, conference rooms, restaurants) and the nature of the visit allows this. Ask family members to come out to meet you if uncomfortable with area.
- In addition to considering alternative private sites for visiting with the family, take a buddy, or agree on a check-in time.
- If an upcoming home visit presents significant safety hazards, talk with your supervisor or a trusted co-worker before you make the visit.

Safety during the Visit

- If your client locks the front door (particularly deadlocks), ask them to leave the key in the lock.
- Never enter a house if there is yelling, screaming, breaking glass, gun fire, etc coming from within signs or if you notice that weapons are on site, etc.
- Always survey the premises for exits and ways out in an emergency. Position yourself between the client and an exit and maintain clear access to an exit at all times. If there are identified risks for visits and a two-person visit is not practical, arrange for someone to call you on your mobile phone near the end of your scheduled visit to establish that you are okay; establish a code phrase to use in an emergency.
- Present yourself as calm, confident, observant and in control.
- If there are dogs or other pets which concern you, be assertive and decline providing a service until they are secured and pose no threat.
- Sit in a hard-backed chair. Avoid sitting on upholstered couches or on furniture that may be used to store hypodermic needles or weapons, or may harbor infestations.
- Be aware of your surroundings; leave if your instincts tell you to leave.
- Take universal precaution by washing hands before/after visit.
- Meet with client in a common room. Do not be in any part of the home alone which may trigger a situation that you could be accused of stealing something (i.e. bathroom).
- Pay particular attention to the client's protectiveness relating to certain rooms of the house.
- Do not meet with family members in a kitchen where there may be easy access to sharp objects (including glass), that may be used as a weapon.
- If a person in the home appears agitated or seems to be hallucinating or seeing "shadow people", slow speech, keep your hands visible, and do not make written notes of your observations.
- Do not confront suspected drug activity while in the home.